

CITY OF ABERDEEN
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING
MINUTES

Wednesday, April 10, 2013

A meeting of the Aberdeen Planning Commission was called to order at 7:00 p.m., April 10, 2013, in the Council Chambers by Chairman Swisher.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Joe Swisher, Commissioners Charles Glassman, Karen Heavey, Kevin Miller, Mark Schlottman, and Amy Snyder

OTHERS PRESENT: Phyllis Grover, Director of Planning & Community Development
Gil Jones, Recording Secretary

The minutes of the March 13, 2013, meeting were approved.

AGENDA ITEMS:

1. Discussion on Aberdeen Form-Based Code/amendments to Chapter 235, Development Code

Presenters: David Dahlstrom, AICP, Upper Eastern Shore Regional Planner, Maryland Department of Planning; Stacey Dahlstrom, AICP, Office of Planning and Capital Programming, Maryland Department of Transportation; Pat Keller, Deputy CAO, Statewide Service Development, Maryland Transit Administration.

Mrs. Grover introduced the three presenters and indicated tonight's discussion would speak to form-based codes and transit-oriented development (TOD), and an overview of the work the group has done to this point. Mr. Dahlstrom, Mrs. Dahlstrom, Mr. Keller, and Mrs. Grover have been working as a core group on amendments to the Aberdeen Development Code. These amendments are slated for presentation to the Planning Commission in May and June. Mrs. Grover referred to the Transportation Element of the Comprehensive Plan and the goals, objectives, and land uses spelled out within that document, reviewed the history of the TOD designation, and touched on the previous public workshops that helped form a vision for the train station Master Plan, as well as areas along parts of East Bel Air Avenue, West Bel Air Avenue, and U.S. Route 40. The group has also worked with Aberdeen Proving Ground (APG), the Chesapeake Science and Security Corridor (CSSC), and Harford County, with the latter two entities having provided grant funds over the years for marketing and feasibility studies. Mrs. Grover asked the Planning Commission to look through the Transportation Element of the Comprehensive Plan to see the general vision for this area. She said the work group will speak to land use and the things needing to be changed in the Development Code to accommodate this type of development.

Mrs. Dahlstrom explained the goals of the TOD program from a State standpoint: to help bring facilities and resources to those communities designated for TOD; foster an environment to increase transit ridership; provide a pedestrian-friendly and bicycle-friendly place; and to bring more vitality to the area within a one-half mile radius of the transit station. The idea would then be to take the goals and objectives of the Aberdeen Comprehensive Plan and see what they could look like when applied. Three concept areas have been identified – Station Square (around the station itself and part of Route 40), Festival Square (the area around Festival Park and City Hall), and Residential Square. She feels you need the right development regulations to enable the City to get where it wants to be. This includes form-based codes, which are place-based, not an overlay. There would be some text regulations speaking to things such as setbacks, much the same as with current zoning regulation language. In addition, there would be some graphic illustrations to enable all parties concerned to understand the City's goals for the areas in question. The core area (one block from the station) would have the greatest density and be geared toward support of the transit element. The density and intensity of development would decrease as you move further away from the station. The aim is to basically cut down on car usage.

Mr. Keller said Aberdeen's advantages are that its TOD status was designated early on, there is a station Master Plan, and the City made an effort to incorporate the TOD into the community. He cautioned that we should be careful of depending on zoning in and of itself, in that while it sets parameters, it can't always do what you think it should and doesn't always do a good job in terms of design. The effort to overcome this can lead to the establishment of various design boards that place additional layers over the process. This can lead to uncertainty and a disharmony of development. Form-based codes tell what you'd like to achieve, not necessarily how to do it. Once the form-based codes are in, you'll get what you want without surprises. Businesses will know what to expect, therefore eliminating questions and struggles over what you would like a project to be versus what you end up getting. The key is to get the type of building you want without worrying so much about what is done on the second floor, whether it's residential or commercial.

Mr. Dahlstrom indicated that under form-based codes, no two communities are the same. Form-based codes look at what's in place, and then work to encourage a certain vision so the community ends up with what it would like to see in a given area. Zoning and development codes don't always achieve this. Form-based codes have been used in various locales over the last 15 years to help achieve the vision the community has set for itself. Mr. Dahlstrom explained that each zone (called a "transect") within the form-based set-up has a specific set of building standards. This lets a developer know the rules are a little different for this specific area. Form-based codes keep the street network in place, then a regulatory plan is crafted and standards set up for that area. All developers would know what is expected and that all development would abide by the same rules. The form-based codes are no different from regular zoning codes, except that they give graphic illustration of what the code language itself means.

Mr. Keller reiterated the form-based codes in question would be tailored specifically to the needs of the City of Aberdeen. For example, the street layout should be what we want and/or need based on our particular requirements, not someone else's. Mr. Dahlstrom indicated he had measured the sidewalks and streets downtown and found the sidewalk on one side of West Bel Air Avenue to be two feet wider than on the other side. He added there have been major transformations in some areas related to TOD, such as Ballston Commons in Arlington, Virginia.

Mrs. Heavey said the City has code standards, but some have changed over time due to variances and the fact that some agencies other than those in the City have a say over certain areas, such as the State Highway Administration (SHA) having control over West Bel Air Avenue. Mr. Keller said SHA is an important factor in this process, since Route 40 comes right to the downtown area. Mr. Dahlstrom said State agencies are learning their regulations need to be helpful and supportive of the community, but this is all an evolutionary process. He added that some communities don't have ideas and plans in place when project funding comes open, but Aberdeen does.

Mr. Schlottman felt these plans would require tremendous coordination between all agencies, especially Amtrak. Mrs. Dahlstrom said the CSSC has provided some funds for the station feasibility study. Amtrak has been contacted, and has been very helpful and encouraging. Mr. Schlottman spoke to the success and broad use of the station. He feels a Code change is easy, but coordination of effort and funding are vital, as well as coordination between agencies and marketing to developers. Until the overpass and station issues are dealt with, developers may be reluctant to engage this area. Amtrak may think that since the parking lots are full every day, why change? Mrs. Grover said the rehabilitation of this station and surrounding area are closer now than ever, since all governmental and agency partners are on board. The importance of this project needs to be impressed upon the State Delegation as well. Mr. Schlottman realizes we need to start somewhere, but it is challenging. Mrs. Dahlstrom feels that all entities have a part in this and the Planning Commission's part is to give consideration to getting new zoning in place. Mr. Keller said if SHA was not comfortable with the plans for Route 40 and the station underpass possibilities, the work group would not have been developed. Money at this point is the issue. Mr. Schlottman hopes some of the new gas tax money comes our way. Mr. Dahlstrom said other jurisdictions have had big issues to consider similar to our overpass, but still others, even without this type of problem, haven't been willing or able to change their codes or master plan. It all begins with the master plan – the community deciding what they want to be. Then you tackle one issue at a time and set priorities for use of funding.

Mr. Swisher asked, based on the panel's knowledge and work with this plan, what the time frame is and the estimated cost in current dollars. Mrs. Dahlstrom stressed that what is currently being worked on is the zoning amendments in order to implement the Master Plan, so she does not have a total cost for that full implementation. The time frame is 20 to 25 years. The current estimate for the underpass and Station Square is \$36 million. Additional money for the further re-development effort will come from a combination of grant monies received and investment by developers. Other elements to consider are development and implementation of form-based codes; development of a community representative steering committee, per the Master Plan; and development of a liaison with agencies such as the CSSC. In Mrs. Dahlstrom's view, all of these elements working together will help development over time.

Mrs. Snyder said it seems to her that this will never really work unless some sort of mass transit from the train station into APG is set up. Mrs. Dahlstrom said the CSSC has a Federal grant to operate such a shuttle. Mrs. Grover indicated APG now has a transit office and is reaching out to various directorates.

Mr. Swisher recounted a brief history of development and zoning regulations in Aberdeen and asked how the potential changes would be integrated into our present documents. Mr. Dahlstrom said the group is looking at the existing Code and inserting the new language, including the

regulating plan, along with some new definitions. There would be three new zoning categories for the TOD area, Neighborhood, Corridor, and Downtown. Standards for each of these would be established as necessary, as with any other zoning category. Some may be similar to what we have now, others may be different. He said that existing zoning doesn't always allow for consistency with the master plan vision or result in a development product that the community can be happy with. Standard zoning can be very flexible, allowing for companies, especially those with a national profile, to put in their preferred version of a building to meet their standards, as opposed to meeting a standard that the community would like to see. In addition, zoning regulations generally define what can be done in a given area. TOD regulations would allow for a variety of mixed uses together, unlike what our current Code allows, as long as they meet the community vision.

Mr. Swisher asked for any comments from the audience. None were forthcoming.

Mrs. Grover outlined the next steps. A draft will be presented to the Planning Commission for discussion at its May 15 meeting, with a public workshop taking place from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. the same day. She recommended the Planning Commission have a work session sometime after May 15. Mrs. Grover asked the Planning Commission to also review their copies of the form-based codes from Bel Air and Margate, Florida.

Mr. Swisher said there are four or five anchors in the downtown and this plan would make the train station the dominant force. He felt it would be a good move to revitalize around the station.

There being no further business or public comment, the meeting was adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

Planning Commission Chairman

Recording Secretary

Date of Approval